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Two thousand families make this a family business

By TREVOR PHILPOTT, SUNDAY TIMES REPORTER

"CONSETT," the blast-furnaceman said over a pint in the Wheatsheaf, "is the 'plate-ends'. Further on there's nothing. Only the moors."

The stranger from the softer South is bound to be asking himself at first, "What makes people live here, fifteen steep miles from Newcastle, a thousand feet up on this windy hillside? What makes them stay? And if they leave, why do they nearly always come back?"

For that is what happens. Once a Consett man, they say, always a Consett man.

The town has grown up with steel. In 1840, when the sheep were still grazing over these hills, over the finest coking coal for hundreds of miles, Consett was a village of 195 souls. Now it has over seven thousand workers, and a production target of a million tons for 1958: steel plates four inches thick for atomic reactor shells, steel for the walls of supersonic wind tunnels, steel for railway wagons, boilers, bedplates, storage tanks; steel, above all, for the busy shipyards of the North-East coast.

Consett and its Iron Company have grown and prospered together. Grandfather, father, son and grandson, feel they have places there; so do uncles and cousins, daughters and daughters-in-law. It is a family business. And over two thousand families are in it.

The McCrory family is one of them. Tony, a sixteen-year-old boy labourer, stood on one of the steel plates and tried to remember how many relatives he had in the steelworks. "Do you mean all of them? Well, there's Dad, up the Blast. And my brothers, Hughie on the Bessemer, Herbert in the fitting shop, John driving a crane, not counting Jimmy who's called up now, but will soon be back in the New Mill. Then I've got cousins and brothers-in-law, uncles—well, there were sixteen in my family you know, not counting Dad and Mam."

"I'd be lost"

John Moss, shift manager in the melting shop, stood beside one of his open-hearth furnaces and said with quiet pride, "Ay. It's a good job I've got and everybody here knows I worked hard enough to get it; progressively labourer, fourth hand, third hand, second hand . . . all the way through. Nobody's envious, everybody knows me. I'd be lost if I

had to leave Consett. Dad was a first-hand melter here. Old George Moss, my grandfather, used to work on the furnaces when they fed 'em with hand charges, twenty-five tons at a time pushed in through the front door. Now we've got 150-ton furnaces and electrically-controlled casting cars and we get 20,000 tons a week."

Nobody Lonely

In the plate mill, Kenneth Hambleton was acting as assistant foreman. "My father worked the shears in this mill. And my grandfather worked here too. I've got six brothers and two sisters in the works, and Lord knows how many uncles and cousins."

"There's not a lonely person in Consett," said Hedley White, the shift foreman. "I've been lonely in the middle of London, but never here. In a big works like this, growing so fast, there's a job for every kind of chap. Some go away for experience and a few have itchy feet for a while, but they all seem to settle here eventually. On this shift I've got chaps who've been brought here by the local girls. The girls don't like going away either."

In the choirs, the sports teams, the dramatic groups, the young folks' and old folks' clubs that thrive in this isolated town, the people can play, as they work, amongst friends with whom the ties are generations strong. "And before you go," Hedley White went on, "take a look at some of the country around here . . . within a few minutes' walk of the works. We've got some jolly good cricketers and golfers amongst our lads—you'll see why."

The cricket ground, levelled out of the hillside and, still higher, the golf course, hung like two fantastic verandahs looking over one of the loveliest valleys in Britain. Beyond it, the hills are heaped faintly on the horizon all the way to the border.

Hidden on the other flank of the same hill are the tangled silhouettes of a steelworks, growing still, which provides this exposed working town with a security and warmth which many a spa and showplace will never have.

This personal report was invited by the British Iron & Steel Federation, which believes that everyone in Britain should know the facts about steel and the men who make it.

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